DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 048 583 AL 002 770

AUTHOR	Nicklas, Thurston Dale
TITLE	A Choctaw Orthography.
INSTITUTION	Southeastern State Coll., Durant, Okla.
SPONS AGENCY	Office of Education (DHEW), Washington, D.C.
PUB DATE	70
GRANT	OEG-70-3473(280)
NOTE	12p.
EDRS PRICE	EDRS Price MF-$0.65 HC-$3.29
DESCRIPTORS	*Choctaw, Legends, *Orthographic Symbols, *Phonemic Alphabets, *Writing

ABSTRACT

The Choctaw orthography described here is designed to (1) be as accurate a representation of the spoken language as possible, (2) provide a more or less uniform spelling for each morpheme without sacrificing the first condition, and (3) be acceptable to the speaker of Choctaw and easy for him to learn. It is essentially phonemic, with deviations where noted. The vowels, consonants, double consonants, nasal vowels, and epenthetic vowels are discussed. A sample text, a story about the creation of the Choctaws, is given in Choctaw and in English translation. (See AL 002 769 for the author's description of Choctaw word structure.) (AMM)

ED 048583

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH, EDUCATION & WELFARE
OFFICE OF EDUCATION
THIS DOCUMENT HAS BEEN REPRODUCED EXACTLY AS RECEIVED FROM THE PERSON OR ORGANIZATION ORIGINATING IT. POINTS OF VIEW OR OPINIONS STATED DO NOT NECESSARILY REPRESENT OFFICIAL OFFICE OF EDUCATION POSITION OR POLICY

A CHOCTAW ORTHOGRAPHY

Thurston Dale Nicklas

Choctaw Bilingual Education Program

McCurtain County Superintendent of Schools

Idabel, Oklahoma

and

Southeastern State College

Durant, Oklahoma

1970

This publication is issued pursuant to terms of
Contract No. OEG-70-3473(280) with the Office of Education
U. S. Department of Health, Education and Welfare

AL 002 770

INTRODUCTION

The Choctaw orthography described here is designed to (a) be as accurate a representation of the spoken language as possible, (b) provide a more or less uniform spelling for each morpheme without sacrificing condition (a), and (c) be acceptable to the speaker of Choctaw, and easy for him to learn. It is essentially phonemic, with deviations where noted.

If the orthography meets condition (a), then by applying the spelling rules he has learned, a speaker of Choctaw will be able to "sound out" a new word when he encounters it, and he will be able to spell a word he has not seen before. This condition is met if there are no silent letters, and every sound in the language (phoneme) has a letter or group of letters to represent it.

However, accurate, smooth reading and writing are not based on sounding out words, but rather on instant recognition of a word as a whole. Thus it is desirable that each word, or rather morpheme, have a single spelling--condition (b). It is frequently the case that conditions (a) and (b) cannot both be met. In such cases, condition (a) overrides condition (b). These will be noted, especially in the morphology, under the rubric 'sound changes'.

Condition (c) is the most important. If an orthography is not acceptable to the people who are to use it, it will not be used no matter how well it is constructed. This orthography is based heavily on a study of documents written by contemporary Choctaws. Essentially it is the orthography used by them, but with the rules followed consistently.

I. THE VOWELS

Choctaw has three basic vowels, in terms of the position of the tongue when they are pronounced. These three basic vowels may be short, long, or nasalized. We discuss nasalized vowels in a later section. Here we discuss the non-nasal short and long vowels.

The short vowels are spelled a i o. They have approximately the following values:

a	is like the a in the word	father,	or
	like the a in the word	sofa.	
i	is like the i in the words	big, machine,	or
	like the i in the word	pit.	
o	is like the o in the words	go, rope,	or
	like the u in the words	put, rude.	

These English words use the letters a i o in this way: papa, mama, Pogo, tipi, sofa.

These are all the letters we need to spell Choctaw vowels. Note that each letter represents two or three sounds; a represents the a of father or the a of sofa. These minute differences do not need to be spelled.

Here are some Choctaw examples:

bala	'bean'	fala	'raven'
Chahta	'Choctaw'	hattak	'man'
alla	'child'	yammat	'that'
bihi	'mulberry'	hishi	'body hair'
nipi	'meat'	iyyi	'foot'
iti	'tree'	issish	'blood'
sholosh	'shoe'	bokko	'knoll'
sokko	'muscadine'	lokchok	'mud'
hapi	'salt'	takchi	'tie, hex'
shapo	'hat'	kallo	'hard'
iya	'go'	hika	'fly'
chilok	'hole'	ishko	'drink'
losa	'black'	shokha	'hog'
oka	'water'	lowa	'burn'
fowi	'bee'	hokchi	'plant'
hoshi	'bird'	tohbi	'white'

For each of the short vowels a i o, the Choctaw language has a corresponding long vowel. The long vowels are pronounced more or less like the short vowels, but they are held twice as long.

There is no very satisfactory way to spell the long vowels, nor is it necessary to spell them. The overwhelming majority of the long vowels are basically short vowels which are pronounced long because of their position in a word. In a different form of the word, they may be short again. So to spell the difference in such words would be against condition (b). There are few if any words which are distinguished by length alone; there is always something else in the word which helps make the difference. So vowel length carries very little information, and does not need to be spelled. None of the documents I have seen try to indicate long vowels. So we will write each long vowel just like the corresponding short vowel.

Here are some words with long vowels. In each case the next to the last vowel is long.

shiki	'buzzard'	waya	'to grow'
nowa	'to walk'	toli	'ball game'
achi	'to say'	oti	'to kindle fire'
chaha	'tall'	hili	'to fly (plural)'
niya	'fat'	banaha	'shuck bread'
kobafa	'broken'	lhitofa	'unraveled'

In these pairs of words, the first one has a long vowel, the second one has the corresponding short vowel: shiki nipi, waya bala, nowa lowa, kobafa kobaffi, lhitofa lhitoffi. When the conjunction cha or na is added to a verb, the vowel of the verb often is lengthened: ona, ona-cha; tani, tani-cha; pisa, pisa-cha. The vowel is also lengthened in the negative form of the verb: ona, ikono; tani, iktano; pisa, ikpiso. These last examples use the verbs ona 'to arrive there', tani 'to arise', and pisa 'to see'.

II. THE CONSONANTS

The consonants are represented by the following letters and groups of letters: b ch f h k l lh m n p s sh t w y. All of these have about the same sound they have in English, except lh which does not occur in English. Note that ch lh sh are used to represent a single sound, although they have two letters.

The sound represented by lh is made like an l, but rather than humming as in l, one simply blows air out around the side or sides of the tongue. Some younger Choctaws pronounce lh like the English th as in think. This sound appears in the following words:

lhamko	'strong'	olhti	'district'
palhki	'fast'	nalhlhi	'to sting'
cholhkan	'spider'	nalha	'stung'
ilhpak	'food'	holhponi	'hominy soup'

Many writers sometimes write this sound as hl, especially when it occurs before a vowel. It seems best and simplest to pick only one way to spell this sound. We pick lh because this is like sh and ch--each one has a letter followed by h--and because the sequence hl must be used to spell the sound of h followed by the sound of l, as in mahli 'for the wind to blow', and tahli 'to finish'.

Examples of the other consonants can be found in Section I.

III. DOUBLE CONSONANTS

It is very easy to learn the consonant letters because all of them--except lh--are used in English to represent the same sounds. But care must be taken to spell double consonants when they occur; and care must be taken not to spell a double consonant if it is not pronounced double. Double consonants occur when two identical consonants come together. Here are some examples:

atobbi	'to pay'	ibbak	'hard'
tochchina	'throo'	kobaffi	'to break'
loffi	'to pare'	litaffi	'to break'
shohhala	'light'	sokko	'thick'
akka	'sown'	fokka	'inside'
pokkoli	'ten'	chakkali	'five'
illi	'to die'	kallo	'hard'
alla	'child'	bicholli	'to herd'
akalli	'to patch'	homma	'red'
ammi	'mine'	chimmi	'yours'
yammat	'that'	onna	'to dawn'
banna	'to want'	hannali	'six'
hoppi	'to bury'	issi	'deer'
issap	'louse'	issa	'to cease'
hashshok	'grass'	hittok	'ashes'
kitti	'pestle'	kittosh	'mortar'
shawwa	'bush'	iyyi	'foot'
hayyip	'pond'	kayya	'full after eating'
bayyi	'nephew'	cholhlhi	'to carve'
halhlhi	'to kick'	palhlhi	'to split wood'

Long consonants are common in terms denoting parts of the body, or kinsmen. Note the following:

ippanshi	'head hair'	ichchoshshak	'back of head'
ittakka	'mouth'	innoti	'tooth'
ibbak	'hand'	innali	'back'
ihhatip	'hip'	iffoka	'stomach'
ippokni	'grandmother'	ippohchi	'father--in-law'
iyyop	'son-in-law'	ittikchi	'wife'

All of these examples have the third person singular prefix i-, and mean 'his mouth', etc. In these words, the possessive prefixes used to be followed by a prefix h-; this h- gives rise to the double consonants. Thus i-h-panshi became ippanshi.

There are other instances where h combines to form a double consonant with some other consonant, in some dialects but not others. Some Choctaws say shokha, okhinsh, okhisa, and hohchifo, while others say shokka, okkinsh, okkisa, and hochchifo ('hog', 'medicine', 'door', and 'name'). For a standard spelling, it is best to keep the h.

IV. NASAL VOWELS

In certain positions in a word, the sequences an am ~~im~~ in im on om have changed into nasal vowels. These are usually long. That is, the vowel in front of the m or n became nasalized, and then the m or n dropped out leaving the vowel long. Apparently in Chickasaw this change in sounds did not occur. The nasal vowels are pronounced like the corresponding non-nasal vowels, except that some air is let out through the nose as well as through the mouth.

This same change has occurred in some dialects of English. Notice that the difference between cat and can't is not the n, because we don't pronounce it, but rather that the a in can't has the nasal "twang".

It is convenient to make four rules for the spelling of nasal vowels.

(1) Spell a nasal vowel as am im om before b or p:

ampo	'dish'	omba	'rain'
impa	'to eat'	chompa	'to buy'
lombo	'round'		

(2) Spell a nasal vowel as am im om before m:

momma	'all, still'	ammínko	'my chief'

(3) Spell a nasal vowel as an in on before n:

onna	'to be arriving there'
anniya	'my fat'

(4) Spell a nasal vowel as an in on in other instances; this includes before any consonant except b p m n, and at the end of words:

onsi	'eagle'	inla	'different'
anchi	'quilt'	hallons	'leech'
tanfola	'Tom Fuller'	chonkash	'heart'
sinti	'snake'	wansha	'locust'
hanwa	'locust'	okchank	'melon'

The underlining under the m and n is to show that this is a symbol for a nasal vowel, and not for a double m or double n. Note the difference between homma 'red' and momma 'all, still', and between onna 'to dawn' and onna 'to be arriving there'.

Nasalization must be shown in spelling, because a lot of important differences between words are based on nasalization. It occurs in the aspect forms of the verbs and adjectives. The word takchi 'to tie' has these additional forms (among others): tahakchi 'to tie suddenly, to have just tied", tankchi 'to be tying', and tahankchi 'to keep on tying, to tie several times'. Notice that if you don't spell the nasal vowels, you wind up with only two forms takchi and tahakchi. Here are some additional examples:

pisa 'to see'	ona 'to arrive there'	amo 'to crop'
pihsa	ohna	ahmo
pinsa	onna	ammo
pihinsa	ohonna	ahammo

The basic forms of one set of possessive prefixes are: am- chim- im- pim- hapim- hachim-. In pronunciation, the m is lost before a consonant, and the vowel is nasalized. In spelling, you change the m to n before anything but p b m, and you underline the m (or n) before m (or n); in these examples we use the prefix am- 'my':

alla	'child'	pini	'boat'	minko	'chief'	lopi	'spinal chord'
amalla		ampini		ammminko		anlopi	

niya	'fat'
anniya	

With a very few exceptions, whenever a nasal vowel ends a word it is the objective case suffix -n. The exceptions are the nouns nishkin 'eye', takkon 'peach', cholhkan 'spider', and kapon 'shaggy bark hickory', and the tense element achin. Everywhere but in these four nouns, a final n is lost and the preceeding vowel is nasalized.

The future tense element appears in the expression ona achin 'he will arrive there'. The objective case suffix -n is opposed to the nominative case suffix -t; the -t appears as -sh after an o. When the objective case suffix is last, it is lost and the preceeding vowel is nasalized; when it is not last, it is pronounced like any other n. Note these examples:

hattak mat	hattak ilappat	hattak osh
hattak man	hattak ilappan	hattak on
hattak mano	hattak ilappano	
yohmih mat	atok osh	
yohmih man	atok on	

VI. EPENTHETIC VOWELS

Sometimes, especially in casual speech, an extra vowel will be added to a word between an h or k and a following b m n l. This vowel is an epenthetic vowel. Note these examples:

Careful Speech	Casual Speech
pakna 'top'	pakana
toklo 'two'	tokolo
hokmi 'burn'	hokomi
ikbi 'make'	ikibi
tohbi 'white'	tohobi
tahli 'finish'	tahali
ikhana 'to know'	ikahana

These epenthetic vowels should not be written; the forms used in careful speech should be written.

VII. FINAL NOTES

W and y should be written wherever they occur. Be sure to write tiyak not tiak 'pine', kiyo not kio 'not', talowa not taloa 'to sing', lowa not loa 'to burn', etc.

Since we are writing double consonants, but not long vowels, the two past tense elements in this orthography are spelled tok 'recent past', and -t tok 'distant past', as in ona tok 'he arrived there (recently)', and onat tok 'he arrived there (some time back)'. In the Bible and Hymnal, these two elements are spelled tuk and tok.

When two words come together in the same phrase, and the first one ends in a vowel, and the second one begins in a vowel, the final vowel of the first word is usually not pronounced. It should be written, however, to preserve the visual image of the words. Examples are:

tali anompa (pronounced: tal anompa) 'telephone'
shokha anompa (pronounced: shokh anompa) 'hog tale'
holisso a pisa (pronounced: holiss a pisa) 'school'

This applies also to the verbal elements achin and ahi and ahinla, as in

pisali achin 'I will see'
pisali ahi 'I can see'
pisali ahinla 'I can see'

and the short form of ahinla, anla.

Besides the elements we have described as sounds of Choctaw, there is an accent, or tone, which some words have and others lack. This has very low functional load--few words are distinguished by the accent alone--and is never spelled. Usually the accent is accompanied by some sounds which are written, so that no ambiguity results. In these examples we write the accent over the accented vowel with ´.

náni	'fish'	chokka	'house'
nani	'hill'	anchókka	'my house'
apa	'to eat'	ona	'to arrive there'
ópa	'owl'	óna-cha	'he arrived and ...'

VIII. SAMPLE TEXT

This story about the creation of the Choctaws was dictated to H. S. Halbert by Isaac Pist Onat Abi, a Mississippi Choctaw, in the late 1900's. It is found in Publications of the Mississippi Historical Society, vol. IV, pp. 267-270 (1901); Oxford, Mississippi. Isaac Pist Onat Abi heard it from the old Minkos when he was a boy before the removal.

Hopaki fihna kash, hattak at atoba ammona kat Nani Wayya yon atobat akochchat tok oki. Mashkoki yosh tikba Nani Wayya akochchah mat, Nani Wayya yakni banayya yon ilayonhofkah mat, shilat tahah mat, hashi akochchaka ilhkolit tok oki. Atok osh, Itombi Ikbi [a river in Mississippi] ola hon afohah mat, hakchoma shonkah mat, lowak bohlit tok oki.

Mih man, Chilakki yosh atoklant Nani Wayya akochchat tok oki. Mih mat, yakni banayya yan ilayonhofkah mat, shilat tahah mat, akni at atiyat tok an iyakkayat ilhkolit tok oki. Mashkoki at afohat hakchoma ashonka cha iyat tok on lowak at ittonlat tok on, kowi at lowat tok on, Chilakki at Mashkoki at atiyat tok an ikithanoh mat, yoshoba cha, filammi cha, falammi imma akon ilhkolit tok osh, falammi imma akon ont ayoklachit tok oki.

Mih man, Chiksha yosh atochchinat Nani Wayya akochat tok oki. Mih mat, yakni banayya yan ilayonhofkah mat, shilat tahah mat, Chilakki at atiyat tok an iyakkayat ilhkolit tok osh, Chilakki at ayoshobat tok an onah mat, filammih mat, Chilakki at atiyat tok akinli hon iyakkayat ilhkolit tok oki. Atok osh, Chiksha at Chilakki at ont ayoklachit tok an onah mat, Chilakki bilinka ayoklachit tok oki.

Mih man, Chahta yosh ont ayoshtah man Nani Wayya yamman isht ayyopi akochchat tok oki. Mih mat, yakni banayya yan ilayonhofkah mat,

shilat tahah mat, kanimma ikayoh osh yakni ilappakinlih on abinohlit tok osh, Chahta at ayyashah oki.

Translation

A very long time ago, the first creation of man was at Nani Wayya. They were made there, and they came forth there. The Creeks came out of Nani Wayya first, and they sunned themselves on the earth slopes of Nani Wayya, and when they got dry, they went off towards the east. On this side of the Tombigbee they rested, and as they were smoking tobacco, they dropped some fire.

The Cherokees came out of Nani Wayya next. And they sunned themselves on the earth slopes of Nani Wayya, and when they got dry, they went and followed the trail of the elder tribe. And at the place where the Creeks had stopped and rested, and where they had smoked tobacco, there was fire and the woods were burnt, and the Cherokees didn't find the Creeks' trail, so they got lost and turned aside and went towards the north, and they settled and made a people in the north.

And the Chickasaws came out of Nani Wayya third. And then they sunned themselves on the earth slopes of Nani Wayya, and when they got dry, they went and followed the Cherokees' trail. And when they got to where the Cherokees had got lost, they turned aside and went on and followed the Cherokees' trail. And when they got to where the Cherokees had settled and made a people, they settled and made a people close to the Cherokees.

And the Choctaws came out of Nani Wayya fourth and last. And they then sunned themselves on the earth slopes of Nani Wayya, and when they got dry, they did not go anywhere but settled down in this very land and it is the Choctaws' home.